

Media Watch

HIV disinformation

Gavin Yamey

Deputy editor, *wjm*

If you telephone the San Francisco office of the HIV campaign group Act Up (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), an answer phone message announces 2 surprising “facts.” First, “HIV cannot possibly cause AIDS.” Second, “AIDS drugs are poison.” The San Francisco group, joined by branches in West Hollywood, Toronto, and Atlanta, is on a crusade to challenge what they see as the medical establishment’s intellectual stranglehold over the AIDS community.

Their crusade took on a high profile recently with a flurry of media interest in the author Christine Maggiore. *Newsweek* called her “the HIV disbeliever.” In her book, *What if Everything You Knew About AIDS Was Wrong?*, she explains that HIV tests are unreliable, pregnant women who are HIV-positive cannot transmit the virus to their babies, and AIDS is not a global health problem. Maggiore was 1 of the “HIV dissenters” invited to meet the South African president Thabo Mbeki at this year’s 13th International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa. Act Up San Francisco recently took up her cause, inviting her to a public meeting to discuss “the truth” about AIDS in Africa.

This was no ordinary meeting. Outside the hall, activists wandered around in T-shirts that declared “Warning! This area is being patrolled by Act Up.” They handed out leaflets saying, “Don’t Buy the HIV Lie.” The group is famous for its direct-action activities, and wherever they go, they inspire the feeling that something unsettling is about to happen.

Maggiore proved to be an eloquent and calm spokesperson. Although her views may be extreme and often untenable, she does not come across as an extremist when she recounts her own experiences. She described that in 1992, doctors told her that she was HIV-positive. She had another test that was indeterminate, then a negative test, and finally another positive test. This uncertainty led her to question the scientific knowledge

about the virus and the disease, and she then set up Alive & Well AIDS Alternatives, a nonprofit organization “founded by HIV-positives who have learned to live in wellness without AIDS drugs and without fear of AIDS.” Her personal choice is perhaps understandable, if unconventional.

But when she started to talk about Africa,

her beliefs began to sound increasingly bizarre. HIV disease is not a problem in Africa, she explained, and the figures for the number of infected people are simply false. The sick and dying people she saw in the hospitals could not have had AIDS. “Poverty,” she said, “malnutrition, and lack of access to basic medical care were causing the devastation and disease.”

1980s MEDICAL BLUNDER

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At this point, Maggiore's partner, a film director, showed the audience a film he made when he accompanied her to Durban. We hear a South African journalist saying, "I'm scared for Africa and where it might go. The only hope is Thabo Mbeki." We see a young HIV-positive man who has stopped all of his antiretroviral medication. "I don't have fear," he says. "Fear is a terrible emotion."

It is hard to make sense of all this HIV disbelief, but these 2 voices in the film give some clues. AIDS has been a catastrophic illness, decimating the gay communities in San Francisco and Sydney, Australia, and now is ravaging the developing world. The United Nations estimates that 1 in 2 teenagers in Africa will develop the disease. How is it possible to deal with this appalling phenomenon? Perhaps by denying that there is a problem at all. Boston college psychology professor Joseph Tecce, who has studied AIDS dissenters, told *Newsweek*: "The basis of denial is a need to escape something that is terribly uncomfortable. If something is

horrific, I might want to pretend it doesn't exist."

At the end of the meeting, Maggiore took questions from the audience, and the atmosphere turned confrontational. One man screamed at her to "read MEDLINE" for the wealth of evidence about HIV and its treatment. Another explained that his HIV-positive friends had responded well to combination therapy and that they had no intention of throwing away their drugs.

The international scientific and medical community has made it clear what it thinks of dissenters like Maggiore. More than 5,000 scientists have now signed the Durban Declaration (<http://www.durbandeclaration.org>), which states: "The evidence that AIDS is caused by HIV-1 or HIV-2 is clear-cut, exhaustive and unambiguous. This evidence meets the highest standards of science." The signatories say, "It is unfortunate that a few vocal people continue to deny the evidence. This position will cost countless lives."

Other HIV activists in the United States

and the developing world, including Nobel Prize winners Doctors Without Borders, are similarly outraged by the dissenters. These activists are campaigning for the fundamental right of people in poor countries to have access to HIV medicines. When Maggiore says that poverty is killing Africa, this, they believe, is only a half-truth. Lack of medicines is equally as deadly. The activists publicized their anger at a rally in Durban, carrying placards that read, "One Dissenter, One Bullet."

The 4 rebel Act Up groups want people to reexamine the orthodox view of AIDS. But if this leads to people abandoning the use of safe sex, have they really done the world a service? The number of new HIV cases in San Francisco has risen recently, so people cannot afford to be complacent. Maggiore's mantra, uttered again and again at the Act Up meeting, is that "you have a choice" in whether to take treatment. Perhaps she should tell that to the 24 million people living with HIV and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Media Watch Update

AIDS activists target "renegade group"

ACT UP/San Francisco is a "renegade group" that discourages testing for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), disrupts informational meetings on HIV/AIDS, and "commits communitywide medical malpractice" by disputing the need for HIV medications, the San Francisco-based group, AIDS Activists Against Violence and Lies, wrote in a *San Francisco Chronicle* "Op-Ed" piece (D Wohlfeiler, S Lew, and H Wilson, September 21, 2000, p A27).

The activist group sponsored full-page ads, listing 5 organizations and 194 individual signers, in the local gay press. The group also held a press conference on the steps of City Hall, calling on the community to boycott ACT UP/San Francisco.

Rebecca Hensler, who helped found ACT UP/San Francisco but left when the current leaders took over, said, "[Their message] is threatening the city's ability to provide support services and medical care for people with HIV. The community has had enough" (C Heredia, *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 22, 2000, p A21). Survive AIDS' Michael Lauro, who is coordinating the campaign, said, "I sense a commitment, finally, within our community to confront [ACT UP/San Francisco's] violence and their violent message" (U Torassa, *San Francisco Examiner*, September 21, 2000, A20).

Activists speak out

AIDS Activists Against Violence and Lies contend in their editorial that ACT UP/San Francisco promotes the "myth" that HIV does not cause AIDS and uses the slogan "AIDS is over" on its Web site and bumper stickers. They claim that the group is using the name of another organization, ACT UP—which was founded in the 1980s and is dedicated to increasing resources and treatments for HIV/AIDS—to "appropriate the original[s] . . . credibility." While acknowledging the group's "right to believe what they want," the authors "will not accept that even one potential volunteer becomes afraid to get involved, or worse, that one infection takes place, due to ACT UP/San Francisco's tactics."

The activists conclude, "It is time for all San Franciscans, and all of us fighting AIDS, to stand together and declare our commitment to respect, dialogue, and a healthy future for all of us" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 21, 2000, p A27).

ACT UP/San Francisco replies

Members of ACT UP/San Francisco contend that there is "little to fear from the new effort." Michael Bellefontaine, who considers the new group (AIDS Activists Against Violence and Lies) part of the "AIDS industry," said, "These are the people who told us that protease inhibitors were the cure, and it's no wonder they are rallying around to suppress our message."

David Pasquarelli, an ACT UP/San Francisco member who tested positive for HIV in 1995, said, "The issue is not our tactics; it's our message that HIV does not cause AIDS, and the drugs they are pushing are costing countless lives" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 22, 2000, p A21).

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